

Alfie

I hope none of the grown-ups out there find me. I used my invisible spell to sneak under the table but I'm scared it might wear off. Sometimes, if I don't make my spells very well, they don't last very long. I still have to be really quiet because, even when you're invisible, people can hear you. Mrs Young says, 'Be quiet as a mouse,' but when there was a mouse in Mummy and Daddy's bedroom they said it was so noisy, scratching and running around, that they couldn't sleep, so I don't think mice are very quiet really. I'm going to be quieter than a mouse and try really hard not to move. But sometimes my arms and legs just move on their own without me telling them to. Mummy and Daddy get cross faces when they do that, but I don't know how to make them stop.

It's really dark under here, like when I go to bed. I hate going to bed because I have to stop what I'm doing and I'm scared when it's dark a robber will break in and steal me. When I'm busy with my Lego or my puzzles or my games, they fill up my head, but when Daddy makes me stop and go to bed, the worries come back because there's more space. If I had my pebble light, it would be better. I like watching the colours – they go round and round, and I don't feel so terrified. My pebble lamp goes red, purple, blue, green, yellow, orange then back to red and it does the same pattern every time, which is good because then you know which colour is coming next. I like knowing which one's coming next.

Emily

To tell you the truth, it's not quite what I'd expected. I had visions of hung heads, clenched fists, swear words muttered through gritted teeth. Instead, there's an elderly man tackling a crossword, a woman crocheting what looks to be a mobile-phone cosy and a pair of middle-aged men chatting away merrily about the amazing bread peacock they saw on this week's *Bake Off*. I re-check the venue details on the letter scrunched up in my coat pocket. Anger management? It feels more like games afternoon at a dingy social club.

The irony is I probably look exactly like I belong in anger management: newly shaved head, hoody, chewing gum like an insolent teenager. It's like I've come in character. But I shouldn't be here. It's a joke. I didn't do anything wrong.

To avoid having to engage in small talk with a bunch of people I've never met, I head over to the canteen-style table in the corner. There's a dent in the wall behind it and I wonder, with a flicker of anticipation, whether it was caused by an irate fist or a hurled mug. Perhaps things are going to get a little more exciting after all.

I make a coffee, piling in the sugar, and loosen the lid of the biscuit tin. It's a meagre selection. A few digestives, an abundance of the blandest biscuit in the world – the Rich Tea – and two chocolate Bourbons. It's not really a choice. I take out a Bourbon, dunk it in my coffee and,

great, lose most of it as it disintegrates and sinks to the bottom of the cup. What I really need is a bacon butty, something substantial enough to soak up some of the excess alcohol currently circulating through my veins, but beggars can't be choosers, I guess.

As I look down to check that my jeans aren't embarrassingly hoicked up over my socks, I notice two small shoes sticking out from under the table. They're bright blue with dinosaurs embossed on the side. Crouching down, I lift the tablecloth to be met by the eyes of a little boy, his eyebrows comically furrowed.

'Hey, are you OK down there?'

The boy, who must be only about five, studies me as if reading the words on a page but doesn't speak. Then he buries his face in his knees and covers his head with his arms. I'm only being nice. Surely my face isn't that off-putting? I scan the room to see if he belongs to anyone but, unless they've simply forgotten that their child exists, there are no obvious claimants so I try again.

'Shall we go and find your mum or dad?'

Tentatively, the boy uncovers one eye and peers out at me, then shakes his head, so, using the only strategy I know to successfully communicate with children, I reach up on to the table, locate the biscuit tin and hold it out to him.

'Want one?'

The boy eyes me suspiciously, then examines the selection before taking out the last Bourbon.

'Good choice. Go on, take another one, if you want.'

He looks at me as if he suspects it might be a trick, then slowly picks out a digestive. I can't exactly leave him sitting on his own and I'm in no hurry to join the adults in the

room, so I squeeze under the table and position myself next to him. The cramped dark spot turns out to be strangely appealing, like returning to the womb. Perhaps no one would notice if I spent the whole session down here.

For a short time, we both tuck into our sugary snacks, the little boy looking over at me occasionally but still not saying a word. I'm not really sure what kids like to talk about anyway, so I'm happy to adopt the silence. Then, suddenly, there's the sound of the door slamming shut and a man's voice, breathless and panicked.

'Alfie? Alfie, are you in here? Anyone seen a little boy?'

I slither out from underneath the table and stand up. 'He's here.'

A man and a woman run over, looking like they've just escaped from the pages of *Tatler*; him in his woollen pea-coat and her in her Burberry mac. They *definitely* don't look like they belong here.

'Where is he?' The man looks at me accusingly, like he thinks I'm just pretending to have found his son as some kind of sick prank.

'He's under the table.'

Clearly devoid of manners (I guess money can't buy you everything), he practically pushes me out of the way before he bends down, grabs the boy's hand and pulls him out from under the table. The woman looks on expressionless, evidently not surprised to see her husband being so obnoxious.

'What were you thinking, running off like that? We were so worried about you. Do you understand that, Alfie? We were terrified. Anything could've happened to you.'

The man glances at me as if his son being found by

someone who looks like me is near the top of his list of feared outcomes.

The little boy crosses his arms and turns his head away from his dad. ‘You and Mummy were shouting.’

‘We were not shouting. Anyway, that’s no excuse. You know you should never go where we can’t see you.’

Alfie glares at his dad and then lifts the digestive to his mouth in an unmistakable act of rebellion.

‘Give me that.’ The man grabs the remains of the boy’s biscuit out of his hand and, in what turns out to be an extremely unwise decision, throws it in the bin at the end of the table.

Well, it’s like a switch being flipped. The once silent boy starts screaming, at an incomprehensible volume given his small stature, and pummels his dad’s thigh like it’s a punching bag.

The dad holds his son’s arms by his sides. ‘Alfie, be quiet. You can’t scream in here.’

‘Come on, Jake. Let’s just take him out,’ the woman says in a hushed voice. ‘Everyone’s staring.’

The man surveys the circle of chairs, then looks at me before finally turning to his wife. ‘And that’s my fault, is it?’

The boy refuses to walk of his own accord so his dad pulls him along with his feet dragging on the floor and bundles him out the door while the woman hurries behind, her eyes glued to her expensive leather boots.

As they exit, a man strolls in carrying a folder. From his authoritative presence, I guess he’s the group leader. He has dreadlocks down his back and his clothes look like they belong to someone twice his size. I pick up my coffee, now offensively cold and laced with remnants of Bourbon, and

join the circle, locating the final three empty chairs and purposefully sitting on the middle one.

The elderly gentlemen who was doing the crossword puts it aside, leans across the empty seat and holds out his hand. ‘My name’s Bill. Welcome to the group.’ As he speaks, his eyes emit such kindness I can’t imagine him ever saying a cross word to anybody.

‘Thanks.’ I shake his hand. It always feels uncomfortable – a gesture more befitting a bygone era. Then there’s a pause during which he doesn’t look away – an implied expectation for me to offer more – but I’m not sure what ‘more’ he’s looking for.

‘And you are?’

‘Oh, sorry. I’m Emily.’

He nods, raising his eyebrows in a playful expression that strips years from his face. ‘Ah, my granddaughter’s called Emily. I hope you’re nothing like her, though. She’s a pain in the backside, to be honest with you.’ He laughs and I smile awkwardly, looking down in the hope that will end the conversation. ‘Well, it’s lovely to have you here, Emily.’

When I glance up to acknowledge his comment, I notice someone surveying me from across the room. It’s a woman in her forties. Clutching her imitation Prada bag and wearing shiny black patent heels, she brazenly looks down her nose at me. Women like that always do. Unfortunately for her, her low-budget hairdresser has gone for a slightly cheap-looking shade of red and her manicured fingernails are just that bit too long. Try as she might to disguise it, it’s obvious she’s from the same side of town as me. In fact, she looks a lot like my mum, which just makes me dislike her more.

‘Good afternoon, everyone.’ The group leader flashes perfectly straight white teeth, contrasting with his short black beard.

‘Good afternoon,’ the group responds in school-assembly-style unison.

‘Before we start today’s session, I just want to welcome a couple of new members to the group. They will be joining us until the end of this term, and beyond, of course, if they would like to.’

No, thank you, I’d rather do an Aron Ralston and get my arm trapped by a boulder for 127 hours.

Much to my embarrassment, he gestures towards me and all eyes turn in my direction. Then he looks around, searching for someone else. As he does so, the little boy’s dad walks back in, holding up his hands in apology.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he whispers, walking through the centre of the circle.

Unfortunately, the only empty spaces are next to me. He removes his posh coat, hangs it on the back of a chair and sits down. I shuffle away from him, my chair betraying me by squeaking against the floor.

‘Not a problem, Jake. There’s tea and coffee over there if you want to grab one in a minute. There might even be a biscuit if you’re lucky and these gannets haven’t eaten them all. Anyway, everyone, say hello to Emily and Jake.’

‘Hello,’ the group choruses.

My face starts to burn and I sink into my chair. It’s like my first day at grammar school. Walking into the form room, worrying whether the heels of my shoes were high enough, if my skirt was the right length. Trying to disguise the rip in my second-hand blazer by wrapping my arms around my waist.

I don't say anything but offer a please-stop-staring-at-me twitch of the lips, then look down at my hands; the skin around my nails is dry and sore.

Jake runs his hand through his exceptionally healthy-looking hair. 'Nice to meet you all.'

'Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to say anything about yourselves just yet, but I wanted to welcome you into the group. My name is Sam, by the way.'

Sam has the perfect smile for someone whose job it is to maintain the calm of inherently pissed-off people. It's warm and uplifting and I wonder if he's developed it over time, practised it in the mirror, or if he's just one of those irritatingly happy people who see the positive in everything. *Lost your job? It's the perfect chance to follow your dream! Car got stolen? Think of the health benefits!* I've never understood it, myself. My counsellor once suggested that my 'life experiences' – what a great term that is – have skewed my view of the world, but I'm not convinced. I'm just a realist. Statistically, most marriages end. Most people work nine-to-five dead-end jobs that they hate, go home to houses that they'll never be able to afford to buy, watch television programmes that don't really interest them and then go to sleep, repeating the process until whatever ailment the Fates decide upon ends it. It's like when my foster mum told me she had terminal cancer. I was heartbroken but, at the same time, there was a familiar inevitability to it. Of course the one adult who'd ever really cared about me was going to be taken away.

It dawns on me, sitting here, that Sam's is the kind of smile that makes me want to make a Sam effigy and stay up at night sticking pins into it.

Maybe I am in the right place after all.

Sam brings out a triangle and taps it. All at once, the group close their eyes, bow their heads and put their hands together in what looks like prayer. I'm not sure if my ears are deceiving me but I'm pretty sure some of them are actually emitting a low hum. They're a few steps away from getting on the floor and launching into the downward bloody dog.

After a few moments, Sam hits the triangle again and they all look up, like they've come out of hypnosis.

'Now that we are all feeling centred and mentally and emotionally open, we shall begin. Please greet the person next to you. For our newbies, we make a declaration. Heather, Sharon, would you care to demonstrate?'

Miss Hoity-Toity, the one who was eyeing me up earlier, sits tall in her chair, clearly revelling in taking centre stage. 'Of course.'

'Thank you, Sharon.'

Her partner, a timid-looking woman with hair like black candyfloss, looks less sure, her head scanning from side to side as if she's hoping there's someone else in the room called Heather. But, with a sinking of the shoulders, she seems to accept there isn't and takes hold of her partner's outstretched hands.

Predictably, Sharon speaks first, announcing her declaration theatrically. 'I promise to listen without judgement and to be honest to myself and to you.'

Heather repeats the line quietly, then they let go of each other's hands.

After that, excruciatingly, we're all expected to do the same. Jake rubs his palms on his jeans, turns to me and holds out his hands. I keep mine tucked firmly under my legs.

‘Look,’ he says through gritted teeth, ‘I don’t want to do this either, but we’ve got no choice. Sam’s watching us.’

I glance over at Sam and he looks away, pretending he hasn’t clocked my rebellion. Poor guy’s got his work cut out with me.

Seeming to accept I’m not going to hold his hands any time this millennium, Jake drops his, then says, loudly enough for Sam to hear, ‘I promise to listen without judgement and to be honest to myself and to you.’

I chew the skin around my thumbnail. ‘What you said.’

‘OK, everyone,’ Sam says. ‘Great. So the talking point for your pairs today is key triggers. Things that really set off your anger. It doesn’t have to be the big stuff – just anything that you know really riles you. Try to make a list, then we’ll share with the group. Because remember –’ and here the whole group joins in with him – ‘it is not until we understand ourselves better that we can heal ourselves.’

Sam sweeps his hands out in front of him like a priest delivering a sermon and the group respond with a uniform bow. It feels like I’ve accidentally walked into some kind of cult.

‘You want to go first?’ Jake holds out the pen and paper we’ve been provided with.

I take it and write, voicing my words aloud. ‘My main trigger is being forced to sit in classes that I do not effing belong in, discussing an anger problem that I don’t actually have.’

Jake raises his eyebrows. ‘You sure you don’t have an anger problem?’

He laughs, smugness striding across his lips.

I smile in a way that shows him I’m not amused. ‘I’m

sure. You, on the other hand . . .' I stop and leave him to fill in the blanks.

'What?'

'Well, it's pretty clear why you're here.'

'What do you mean by that?'

I bite my tongue. I'm not sure getting into an altercation at the class I've been sent to supposedly to curb such behaviour is in my best interests. 'Nothing. Doesn't matter.'

'No, go on. Tell me why you think I'm here. I'm fascinated.'

Arrogant prick.

'Well, if you really want to know, I saw how rough you were with your little boy. No wonder he ran away. Your wife looked scared shitless too. It doesn't take a genius, does it?'

Jake exhales vociferously out of his nose, chin down, like a bull preparing to charge. 'I was not rough with my son. You think you know everything about me because you witnessed one incident? You haven't got a clue.'

I slip my hands into my pockets. 'You asked.'

'So how about you then, Little Miss Perfect? If you haven't got an anger problem, why are you here? Let me guess, you got lost on the way to teaching your parenting expertise class?'

'Yeah, something like that.'

'Come on. Didn't we just promise to be open and honest?'

I put my foot up on the chair and re-tie the lace of my boot. It's scuffed and dirty so I drop it back to the floor, irrationally feeling that not taking proper care of my footwear weakens my moral standpoint. 'It was either this or a prison sentence.'

I can tell from the way he starts to laugh and then stops

that he's not sure if I'm joking. I'm not going to clarify it for him.

He gestures to the piece of paper in my hand, his face almost pleading. 'Look, shouldn't we get some triggers written down?'

'Why? Scared you might get told off?'

The tinny sound of the triangle echoes around the hall and the group goes quiet.

'OK. Right then. Is there anyone who would like to share what they've got so far?'

A man on the opposite side of the circle raises his hand. He's in his fifties, stocky, and his skin is ruddy and weathered, like he works outside. He has a thin layer of greying stubble and eyelids so heavy-looking I imagine they'd be hard to see out from under.

'Tim, thank you.'

'Well, one of my triggers is my dog,' he says, clasping his hands behind his neck and leaning back. 'He's literally just there all the time. I get back from a hard day at work and he's under my feet, hassling me for attention when I just need time to breathe, and it drives me crazy.'

I laugh and everyone looks at me like I just let out a whoop of joy at a funeral. I genuinely thought he was joking, that he was one of those people who hide their true inner turmoil behind a veneer of tomfoolery. But witnessing the nodding heads and murmurs of agreement, I clearly misjudged the situation.

'My cat's exactly the same,' a tattoo-covered guy pipes up. 'As soon as I sit down to relax, he's crawling all over me, padding me, licking my face. It makes me want to launch him through the window.'

‘Why have a pet then?’ I say it under my breath but it’s like they’ve all got supersonic hearing because, again, all eyes turn on me.

‘Just because he winds me up doesn’t mean I don’t love the thing,’ the cat-launcher retorts. ‘My kids do my head in sometimes, but I’m still glad I’ve got them.’

His anger towards me seems to reflect the mood of the group. The session has not started well. Sam gives me a reassuring smile, underpinned with pity, and redirects the conversation to different triggers. There’s an incredible variety. The misleading photographs on Tinder, people who ride horses on the road . . . the self-service checkouts at supermarkets get a particularly severe battering.

‘It’s my fucking neighbours,’ Bill shouts, and I nearly jump out of my chair at the profanity being expelled with such venom from the mouth of this outwardly mild-mannered man. ‘I’m not sure whether they’re blind or just stupid. If the bin has ‘fifty-five’ written on it, it’s mine, so stop filling it up with your stinking nappies. If they’re not careful, they’re going to find them scattered around their front garden when they wake up one morning.’

Well, I guess looks can be deceiving.

I glance up at the clock and, as it finally strikes one, I’m like a kid when the bell rings for playtime, automatically reaching for my bag underneath the chair.

Sam raises his hand. ‘Just before you go, we do a quick breathing exercise. We have a list of calming phrases up on the board there to help you, but feel free to use any of your own. So, we all make sure we’re sitting upright . . .’

The group sit up straight in their chairs. Already conditioned, Jake follows suit.

‘We breathe deeply – from the diaphragm, not the chest. And then we slowly repeat our chosen phrase. Just keep repeating it while you breathe deeply for two minutes.’

Everyone else begins. I look up at the list of phrases on the board. *I'm in charge of my stress response. In every moment, peace is a choice. Stop and smell the roses.* I feel like either I'm losing the plot or Ashton Kutcher is about to jump out, flash his winning smile and shout ‘Punk'd!’

I mutter, ‘Only thirteen sessions to go, only thirteen sessions to go,’ under my breath and wait for the two minutes to be up. It's like the hands of time have momentarily paused. Then there's the reverberation of the triangle, like angel song straight from heaven, and everyone gathers their belongings and goes on their way.

I swing my rucksack on to my shoulder and start to leave, but Jake holds out his hand as a barrier.

‘I don't hit my son. Or my wife, for that matter.’ He rocks from one foot to the other.

‘It's really none of my business.’

‘But I don't. I know it didn't look great, me grabbing my son like that, but it's complicated. He's . . .’ He pauses like he's struggling to remember the word. ‘Challenging. I get stressed out sometimes and it's “driving my wife away”. Her words. So I agreed to give this a go.’

‘OK. Well, I hope it works out for you.’

I'm not sure why he's being so insistent. Doth he protest too much? I don't really care. I just want to leave.

‘Well, I'll see you next week,’ I say.

Jake's head drops. ‘Yeah, see you.’

Then I run out of there as fast as I can and don't look back.

Jake

I take a deep breath in and try to mentally locate a calming phrase, while Alfie lies at my feet screaming, bang in the middle of the self-service tills in Waitrose.

‘I’m going to count to three and if you don’t get yourself up off the floor and follow me out the door, I’m going to use your baseball bat to smash up each and every one of your Lego models.’

I crouch down and say it under my breath so that, hopefully, the people nearby won’t hear me reaching this new parenting low.

Alfie doesn’t even acknowledge what I’ve said. ‘I want the cake with the red Smartie on it.’

‘Well, it’s yellow. Get over it. You’re very lucky to have a cake at all.’

Spoilt brat.

‘I want the red one. I want the red one.’

I place my card on the reader and pick up my shopping. Thanks to the fact I’m a stingy bastard and not willing to pay five pence for a plastic bag, I now have two boxes of Coco Pops, a four-pack of beer, a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread precariously tucked under both arms, a six-pint bottle of milk in one hand and a box containing a cake with a sodding yellow Smartie on it in the other. Therefore, my six-year-old son has me cornered. And he knows it. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s taking great pleasure in it.

I try a different approach. ‘Please, Alfie. I’ll find you a red Smartie at home and we’ll swap it.’

Alfie shakes his head and kicks his legs. He knows I haven’t got any Smarties at home. He could tell me every treat we have and its exact location in the kitchen.

A man in his sixties glares at Alfie and makes a show of having to step over him. As he does, one of Alfie’s flailing legs catches his trailing foot and nearly sends him flying.

‘I’m so sorry, mate. Are you OK?’

I want to reach out to him, but I have no free hands. He turns around and shakes his head slowly. His face looks like he’s just found me parking in a disabled space.

‘I’d have got the belt if I’d behaved like that. You shouldn’t be pandering to him. You need to show him who’s boss.’

I look at him for a minute, considering my response. The one that comes is not the one I planned. ‘And you need to fuck off.’

He steps back, opens his mouth as if to speak and then closes it again. Then he turns and hurries out, with his shopping sensibly packed in a bag for life.

I know everyone is staring at me. I know they’re thinking I’m a monster. They might just be right. Sometimes it feels like that’s what I’ve become.

I put the shopping down on the floor next to my screaming son, tuck the beer and the cake box under one arm and pick Alfie up and hold him under the other, like a roll of carpet. Struggling to the car, I shove him in through the back door and slam it, welcoming the muting effect it has on his shrieks. After throwing my two salvaged bits of shopping into the boot, I lean up against it with my head in my hands, unable to face getting in.

‘Excuse me.’

‘What?’ I snap.

I look up to see a young woman with a little girl gripping on to her leg, terrified by the ogre growling at her mummy. The woman holds out a bag of shopping and it takes me a minute to realize what it is.

‘My little girl would be lost without her Coco Pops so I thought you might want this. Sorry to have disturbed you.’

I’m not sure if it’s because she has a pretty face, or because this is probably the nicest thing anyone has done for me in a very long time, but I have a sudden desire to run off with this woman and never go home. To raise her cute, well-behaved little girl as if she were my own.

‘Thanks. And sorry for snapping at you just then. I thought you were just another well-meaning member of the public coming to tell me what a terrible job I’m doing.’

She doesn’t commit to a full smile. ‘We’ve all been there. Take care.’

I want to cry, ‘But you haven’t been there. This isn’t just an overtired tantrum. This is every day, about everything.’ Instead, I watch her walk across the car park, her daughter skipping along beside her, obediently holding her hand, and then I get into the car with my son, who I know won’t stop screaming about that bloody red Smartie for the entire fifteen-minute journey home.

* * *

‘Can’t you hear he’s kicking off in there?’

‘Yes, I can. Can you?’

Jemma sighs. ‘Please, Jake. I’ve really got to finish this presentation.’

I'm not actually busy. I'm wasting precious minutes of my life scrolling through the inane stuff on my Facebook feed. How many motivational phrases can one person share in a day? One of my friends, or more accurately one of the people who is classed as my 'friend' on Facebook, must have shared over five riveting quotes every day this week. This morning's corker was: 'Make today count. You'll never get it back.' The irony makes me chuckle. I can just picture Tom sitting at his laptop, googling gems to share, really squeezing the life out of every moment.

I stand up to go and see what minor problem has riled Alfie this time, but not before making sure I have the last word.

'I have work to do too, you know? I've got to clean up all the stuff from the lunch I just cooked, then wash Alfie's uniform for tomorrow, then tidy all the mess he made earlier when I did painting with him, and then prepare something for our tea. People might not appreciate it, but I'm doing a "job" here too.'

I feel my balls shrink as I say it. I'm not quite sure how I got here. But here I am – a househusband. Whining about the dishes while my wife pays the bills. Don't get me wrong. I'm a modern man. I was always comfortable with the fact my wife earned more than me. It didn't threaten my masculinity that she paid more than half towards all our holidays or that quite often *she* would take *me* out for dinner. But now that I have nothing to bring to the table, I can't help but feel inadequate using Jemma's money to pay for a round on the rare occasion I go out with my mates. I hate that the most exciting thing I have to share with her these days is that bio washing liquid is so

much more effective at getting off those hard-to-tackle stains than the non-bio stuff she always used. I wish I could still treat her occasionally, surprise her.

Before we have the chance to rehash this daily argument, Alfie comes running in. His eyes are still red from all the tears he cried earlier, but he's calmed down. For now.

'I need help, Daddy. Why aren't you coming?'

Because I'm not your bitch.

'I am, son. I'm coming now.'

Alfie pulls my arm, dragging me into the lounge, and my heart sinks at the minuscule pieces spread out on the floor. I hate jigsaw puzzles. I'll fight with foam swords and shields until the cows come home. I'm happy to read stories. To draw superheroes to be coloured in. But puzzles . . . just looking at them makes me break out in a cold sweat. And Alfie is a puzzle genius. He was completing hundred-piece ones with ease aged four.

'Do we have to do a puzzle?'

'You should be encouraging him,' Jemma calls through from the other room. 'It's better than him playing that rubbish with you on the Xbox.'

Because you're providing him with an abundance of valuable play experiences.

'Yeah, I suppose you're right, darling.'

Alfie quickly and efficiently picks out the edge pieces and starts to construct the sides of the puzzle. Once all four are done, he holds out his hands, as if to say ta-da.

'Good job, Alfie. You're so much better at this than me.'

'Just keep trying, Daddy. You'll get there.'

I smile at one of my many trite pearls of wisdom being reflected back at me. 'Thanks, little man.'

‘And you’re really good at making up superhero stories. Everyone is good at different things.’

I ruffle Alfie’s hair. ‘You’re getting so wise in your old age.’ Alfie screws up his face. ‘I’m only six.’

I laugh. ‘You’re right. You are. And already wiser than me.’

Alfie powers on, slotting in the middle pieces like a puzzle ninja, while I desperately search the floor for anything that looks vaguely like it might fit. After a minute or so, I spot part of the monster’s face and position it in the correct place. I’m pretty chuffed with myself. That is until Alfie explodes, launching the box across the room.

‘What’s the problem now, Alfie?’

He tries to say something through the mass of tears.

‘Calm down. Use your words.’

‘You did my bit. I do the monsters.’

‘Will you just chill out? I only put one piece of puzzle in. It’s not that big a deal.’

Alfie sweeps all the puzzle pieces across the floor.

‘Fine.’ I stand up and throw the piece I’m holding and it inadvertently hits him. ‘Do it your bloody self.’

People used to marvel at my relaxed demeanour. *You’re so laid-back you’re almost horizontal.* I was the guy who would leave my A-level marking until 9 p.m. the night before the results were due but never sweat about not finishing it in time. I’d pack my stuff for a holiday on the morning of the flight, despite the fact Jemma had started packing hers at least a week before.

But there is something about the utterly illogical behaviour of my son that makes me want to either throw something through a window or jump in my car and drive. To the sea. To the mountains. Anywhere things make sense.

Because my son does not make sense.

Not one bit.

Alfie attaches himself to my ankle to hold me back. ‘Please, Daddy. Please don’t go.’

I’m so sick of always ending up the bad guy. It feels like whatever I try, I get it wrong. I treat Alfie to a cake – it’s got the wrong colour Smartie on it. I help him with his puzzle – I do the wrong bit. I can never win. And failing every day takes its toll. Especially when it feels like I’m doing it all alone.

I pull my leg free and storm into the dining room. ‘You fancy helping out at all?’

‘Oh, Jake. Give it a rest. I haven’t got time to get involved in your silly fights with Alfie. Just do the right pieces of the puzzle next time.’

‘Are you serious?’

Jemma breathes out through her nostrils. ‘I’ve got a deadline, Jake. You need to deal with this.’

‘I *am* dealing with it. Every fricking day, I’m dealing with it.’

Jemma shakes her head, like talking to me is an inconvenience she could do without, the extra car that pulls out when you’re already stuck in traffic. Picking up her laptop, she walks past me to go upstairs. I know that she will now remain in the study until I call her down for tea and it takes immense self-control not to take her a coffee and ‘accidentally’ spill it over the keys.

When I put my head round the door of the lounge, Alfie has stopped crying. He is kneeling right in front of the television, his face almost touching the screen, watching his favourite episode of *Spider-Man*. He knows it so well

that he mouths all the words and laughs before the funny thing has happened. For a moment, I want to pick him up and cradle him like I did when he was a baby, but then I look around to see the room is trashed. All the puzzle pieces are scattered across the floor, beneath the sofa, under the TV unit. The sofa cushions have been catapulted across the room and a drink has been knocked over on the hearth. Jemma would flip her lid if she saw the mess he's made of her pristinely organized living room.

'What have you done, Alfie?'

Alfie looks up at me and covers his ears. 'I'm not your friend, Daddy.'

'Good. I don't want to be your friend. Now, you need to tidy this mess up or no bedtime story tonight.'

As threats go, it's weak, but tiredness does nothing for my ingenuity. He has snot streaming across his face and his eyes are swollen from the earlier onslaught of tears. I know I should feel some kind of sympathy for my son, but at this moment I just want to run and hide.

'And no more TV for a week.' That's better. Hit 'em where it hurts. I pick up the television controller and turn *Spider-Man* off, then, like *I'm* the child in the relationship, stomp up to my bedroom and slam the door, ignoring Alfie's protests.

When we first realized our bedroom door jammed and would only open with an almighty shove, Jemma put fixing it on the list of things for me to do. But now I'm glad nothing on that list ever gets done, because our bedroom has become my sanctuary. I used to find peace out in the ocean, gliding across a wave on my surfboard. Or flying down a mountain surrounded by white powder under

intense blue skies. Now I have my bedroom. And a pillow to clasp tightly over my head. I can still hear Alfie on the other side of the door, kicking it and shouting my name, but it's muffled and there's a peace in knowing whatever he does, he can't get in.

I know that soon I will have to come out. I'll apologize to Alfie, help him tidy the lounge and then do his puzzle with him, avoiding any parts of the monster. I will cook the tea, salmon because it's Jemma's favourite. I'll ask her how her presentation is going and be supportive when she responds. I will. Just not yet. I'm not ready yet.

* * *

I'm on the home straight. Alfie is bathed, his pyjamas are on, his story has been read. There's a feeling in my chest and it's best described as elation.

'Can you put my lava lamp on please, Daddy?'

I switch it on.

'And my pebble light.'

'I know, buddy.'

'Don't forget to turn them off when I've fallen asleep.'

Alfie never stops and he notices every infraction. Just being with him exhausts me. What it must be like living in his head twenty-four hours a day, I dread to think.

'I won't.'

'And don't move my Lego figures off the windowsill.'

'I'm not that crazy, Alfie.'

As soon as I say it, I wish I hadn't, because I know it'll spark another long tirade of questions. Alfie doesn't do well with turns of phrase.

'What?'

‘Don’t worry.’

‘What do you mean you’re not crazy?’

‘Don’t worry, little man. I was being silly. I won’t touch your Lego figures, I promise.’

‘Perhaps I should move them. I think I’ll put them in my box.’

Alfie starts to get up.

‘It’s fine.’ I sit beside him. ‘No one will touch them.’

‘But . . .’

‘Alfie, you’re tired. Leave them.’ I rest my hand on his tummy.

Alfie lies quietly for a minute, but his eyes are darting back and forth so I know there are more questions to come. I’m not over the finish line just yet.

‘Daddy, “bloody” is a naughty word, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, I’m sorry. I just got cross.’

‘My teacher told me.’

A wave of panic rushes over me. ‘What do you mean, your teacher told you?’

Alfie’s cheeks flush. ‘I said it to another boy.’

‘What?’ I don’t mean to shout it but, despite my earlier lapse, we are not *that* family.

‘I thought it was something you said when you wanted someone to do something. To show them you meant it. I told him it was time to tidy up and that he needed to put the balls away in the shed. He didn’t listen, even though I told him lots of times, so I said, “Put the bloody balls away,” and he ran off saying, “I’m telling.”’

I want to put my little boy in a cocoon and never let him break out.

‘So what did the teacher say to you?’

‘She said, “Did you say the b-word?” so I said, “What b-word? Bloody or balls?” and she got really cross and told me to stop being so cheeky and that it was not OK to use that language.’

‘Oh, Alfie.’ I run my hand through my son’s hair. I can just picture him, all big brown eyes and serious expression, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, completely unaware of what he was doing wrong. ‘Why didn’t they talk to me about this?’

‘It was the day Mummy got me, so they talked to her.’

I nod slowly, careful not to show Alfie the volcano of irritation bubbling inside me.

‘Well, you know now not to use that word, OK? And Daddy will try his very best not to use it too.’

‘I wasn’t being naughty.’

‘I know you weren’t.’ I kiss him on the forehead. ‘Now get some sleep.’

‘I’m just going to put my Lego figures in my box.’

I know it will take longer to argue than to just let him do it. ‘OK. Quick.’

‘I will be, Daddy. By the time you count to ten, I’ll be back in bed.’

‘Night-night, little man. Love you.’

‘Love you too.’

I adopt my nightly position, sitting at the end of his bed with my laptop on my knee, the voice of the health visitor tapping away on the inside of my skull. *They need to learn to settle themselves. Let them cry it out.* Except Alfie doesn’t cry it out. He didn’t when we tried it at four months, when he was waking every hour and a half and Jemma had begun to look like she belonged in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*,

or at a year, when it *really was time for him to be sleeping on his own*, or at age three, when he moved into a ‘big boy’ bed. If you left him to cry it out, he would wail until we were drawing a pension. So, eventually, we gave up and one of us, usually me, sits with him each night until he falls asleep, the resentment slowly eating into my bones.

‘Daddy . . .’

‘Go to sleep.’

‘But, Daddy, it’s important.’

‘No, it’s not. Go to sleep.’

‘In the morning, can I watch *Spider-Man* before school?’

‘Only if you go to sleep.’

‘I’m thirsty.’

Having root canal work would be more pleasurable than this. I get up and pass him a drink.

‘Now sleep.’

‘I don’t know how.’

‘Just close your eyes. Think about something nice.’

‘But that keeps me awake.’

‘So don’t think of anything at all.’

‘My eyes won’t close.’

I reach over and gently push his eyelids closed. ‘There. Now if you say another word, I’m going.’

‘But, Daddy . . .’

I get up to leave the room.

‘OK, I’ll try my best to go to sleep.’

It doesn’t matter how much we’ve tried to exhaust him during the day, getting Alfie to sleep is always a complete nightmare. We’ve tried everything. When he was a baby, we went through what I now call the ‘white noise’ period of our lives, existing to a soundtrack of an untuned radio.

After that, we tried child mediation CDs, but Alfie got so swept up in the ‘relaxing’ adventures it woke him up even more. Audiobooks failed for the same reason. Whale song just prompted a load of questions – *what are the whales singing and where did they learn the songs from anyway, because CD players don’t work under the water?* We even bought a book that had hundreds of five-star Amazon reviews saying it was a miracle cure for insomniac children, but I read it night after night (and it was long and tedious) and, every time, I’d keep glancing over at Alfie excitedly to see if it had worked and, every time, we’d reach the last page with him bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

I sit back down and open up Facebook on my laptop. It tells me that my best friend from university has just posted thirty-three photographs of his latest trip to Venezuela. I click on the down arrow at the top of his post and choose ‘unfollow Martin’, feeling a deep sense of satisfaction as the arty shots of him drinking Polar with the locals disappear into the digital abyss.

After several more attempts to initiate conversation (*what if a monster climbs up the wall and through the window? How is it fair that teachers get cake at playtime and I only get fruit? Is it true that if you hold your breath and touch a stinging nettle it doesn’t hurt?*), Alfie finally falls asleep and I go downstairs to the lounge. Jemma is sitting with her laptop on her knees, occasionally glancing up to survey the television. Her shoulder-length blonde hair is pushed off her face with a hairband and she has no make-up on. When you draw a face in art class and are given the correct proportions to follow, that’s Jemma’s face. Completely symmetrical. Everything in the right place. Although these days it’s usually

shrouded in whatever negative emotion she is feeling towards me, her face is still unequivocally beautiful.

I lie down on the other sofa. Jemma doesn't look up. I don't expect her to. Most of our evenings are spent in silence like this, with only the murmurings of the television in the background. There was a time when our house was filled with noise. Not the kind of discordant noise the days are filled with now. But the noise of laughter, glasses being chinked, animated conversation. At first, I found the whole dinner-party thing a bit pretentious. I was more of a 'beer in a cosy pub after a surf' kind of guy. But over time I got used to it. I even started to enjoy it. I still had to tune out sometimes, when some of the blokes Jemma worked with started spouting self-important drivel about their latest super deal or which fancy car they were going to add to their collection. But in many ways I enjoyed being part of the 'in' crowd. I never had been at school. I didn't play football or rugby. I preferred to sit in the corner and read rather than working out in the school gym. I was a latecomer when it came to girls – always 'the friend' rather than the hot bloke whose name they doodled on their exercise books despite the fact he treated them like crap. So when Jemma came up to *me* in the university bar, I thought maybe it was a wind-up. But it turned out, for some reason, that I was exactly what she was looking for.

But then Alfie came and the dinner parties were whittled down, and all our conversations became about how to 'mend' Alfie. And then, when we realized those conversations were fruitless and that anything we did have to say to each other was neither entirely pleasant nor productive, we just stopped saying very much at all.

But I can't let this one lie. 'Why didn't you tell me Alfie had sworn at school?'

Jemma stares intently at something on her screen. 'Oh, it was nothing.'

'I'd rather decide myself which of my son's actions are important and which aren't, thank you very much.'

She looks up at me, contempt filling her eyes. 'Give it a rest, Jake. You don't tell *me* every single time the teacher wants to talk to you about something.'

Because you don't care.

'I tell you the important stuff, and him getting into trouble for swearing is pretty bloody important.'

Jemma raises her eyebrows. 'I wonder where he gets it from.'

'Oh, fuck you.'

She smirks and I want to put my fist through the wall.

'You want to know why I didn't tell you? Because I didn't want a repeat of what happened last time, especially not with a teacher.'

I don't want to bite. I really don't want to. But it's like she actively seeks to provoke me, so that she can sit on her high horse and say, 'See, told you you're too angry.'

'How dare you? I stuck up for my son. *Our* son. You do remember he's our son, don't you?'

'Don't be an idiot, Jake. Just because you're the stay-at-home dad doesn't mean I love him any less than you or that he is any less mine.'

I take a deep breath. She doesn't get it. It's not about her decision to work. I support that. It's that she's not 'present' even when she's with us.

‘Look, can you just tell me next time something happens at school? It’s important that I know.’

‘Fine.’ Jemma resumes her typing and I know that’s the signal that the conversation is over.

There is so much more to say, but I haven’t got the energy. On my way to our bedroom, I peer into Alfie’s room. He has tossed the cover off and is lying like a starfish in the middle of the bed. His pyjama top has risen up and his little outie belly button is poking out. He looks so young. So innocent. It’s amazing how insanely in love with your child you feel when they’re asleep. I stroke his hair – golden and straight, just like his mummy’s – then gently kiss his forehead, careful not to wake him up.

Emily

Every day at work I find myself staring at the clock on the end wall of the café. It has this aggravatingly loud tick that repeatedly shouts ‘THE SECONDS OF YOUR LIFE ARE TICKING BY, THE SECONDS OF YOUR LIFE ARE TICKING BY.’ Obviously it doesn’t actually shout that. I’m not sure there’s a place in the market for a verbally abusive cuckoo clock, but that’s what I hear as it tick-tocks through my day.

The café is quiet today, which is the last thing I need when my period’s gone AWOL and I am definitely not in a position to be celebrating that news with the purchase of a cute little pair of booties from Baby Gap. To distract myself, I take the latest batch of brownies out and retrieve my trusty ruler from my bag. I get a bemused look from one of the smattering of customers but there’s nothing worse than the person you’re with getting a bigger brownie than you.

Sitting in the corner of the room, there’s a teenage lad, his face covered in acne. He has long hair, dyed black, greasy, and he wears it swept across his face like a shield. He alternates between taking a bite of his panini and tapping away on his phone. A few tables across from him, there’s a group of jocks. Every now and again, they look up at him and laugh and he tries his best to pretend he doesn’t notice them, but it’s obvious he does.

Two of the jocks begin whispering to each other and then one of them, his idiot status highlighted by his backward-facing cap, screws up the wrapper from his sandwich and launches it at the poor long-haired boy, hitting him right in the face. It leaks remnants of salad all over his black Slipknot top. The other lads start creasing themselves and slapping the big shot on the back in congratulation.

I put down my ruler and go to collect the empties on the tables next to them. There's a half-drunk mug of hot chocolate so I pick it up and – I can't resist – as I walk past the lad in the cap, I tilt it towards him and the shit-coloured liquid falls on to the crotch of his jeans with a satisfying splash.

'Ah, fuck's sake.' He slides his chair back and starts scrubbing his jeans with a napkin. 'Watch where you're going, will you?'

I give him an overly apologetic look and speak in my sweetest beauty pageant voice. 'Sorry. It was an accident.'

I'm not a confrontational person. I just can't bear injustice. There are too many people in this world who feel they can waltz around treating others like dirt and no one ever calls them out on it. The long-haired boy looks over at me, a quiet gratitude spreading across his chapped lips, and I give him a conspiratorial nod of the head, then return to the counter.

I bob down to check how much milk we have left in the fridge and when I pop back up there's someone waiting to be served. My chest suddenly feels tight, like an elephant's just trampled on top of me. It's Alex. Trust it to be today that I finally bump into him.

He's looking up at the menu on the wall and hasn't noticed me yet. I wish he looked like crap, but he's effortlessly cool in black jeans and a lumberjack shirt, his hair glistening and bouncy like he's just walked out of a bloody Head & Shoulders advert. Why oh why did I shave my head?

As his eyes meet mine, his head jolts back in surprise. 'Shit, I'm sorry. I thought you still worked in the pub.'

'No, it didn't work out.'

'Oh, right. Sorry.'

I wipe the counter even though it's already clean. 'Nice to know you're avoiding me, though.'

Alex shakes his head. 'I didn't mean it like that. I just didn't think you'd want to see me.'

I don't. And I do. And it's a horrible confliction.

'So, how are you?' he continues, glossing over my lack of response. 'Things going OK?'

Yep, couldn't be better. Other than the fact I'm possibly carrying your illegitimate and unwanted baby, everything is fine and dandy.

'I'm good. So, do you want a coffee?'

Alex looks at me like coffee is a newfangled product he's never heard of. 'What do you mean?'

'You're stood at the counter of a café, Alex. I figure you came here for coffee?'

'Oh, right. Yeah. A cappuccino, thanks, to take away.'

While I'm making his drink, he says something, but the machine's so loud I can't make it out.

'What did you say?'

'I said I'm sorry how everything turned out.'

How it turned out? Like it happened *to* us, two automated beings with no say in our actions. I should've known better

from the start. I *did* know better, but I'm ashamed to say it didn't stop me. I was taking a night course at the local college. Creative photography. He was the tutor. Charming, talented, married. I'd love to say he'd lied about the last bit, but he didn't. I knew that after shagging me in the darkroom he went home to his wife and nine-year-old daughter. It's a poor attempt at absolution, but I was drinking a lot – a somewhat inaccurate use of the past tense considering my Chardonnay-and-Mars-Bar breakfast. It just happened. And then, like rolling down a hill, you suddenly gather momentum and can't stop. He fed me the usual rubbish – he wasn't in love with his wife any more, he'd fallen head over heels for me, he just needed time. Stupidly, I believed him. He made me feel special, beautiful, like I was the only girl in the world worth losing everything for.

It went on for a few months. Until one night, unbelievably *after* we'd had sex, we were putting our clothes back on and I could see it, even in the dark, written all over his face.

'Look, Em, I really . . . ?'

I grabbed my bag and headed straight out the door. Because I knew what he was going to say and I didn't want to hear it. It's always the same. No one ever sticks around for long. That was the last time we had spoken.

I hand over his coffee, wishing it was hot enough to scald him. 'It was for the best.'

The relief is palpable in the way his features relax. Behind him, a group of teenage girls move towards the counter, giggling and chatting about some boy they've just bumped into. I want to slap them and tell them to get a grip.

'Well, I suppose I better let you get back to work.'

I nod and he gives me this look. I can't quite place the

emotion on his face, but I'm pretty sure it's sympathy. He goes to walk away but then turns back.

'I like the hair, by the way. Very Sinéad O'Connor.' He smiles, the exact same cheeky smile that made me fall for the cheating bastard in the first place.

Clearly needing a slap around the face myself, I force myself not to smile back. 'You're showing your age there.'

He laughs and I can tell he thinks he's got off scot-free, but then I guess he has.

* * *

Back at my flat, I put my work clothes away in the wardrobe, grab my joggers and hoody and then locate the packet in the bottom of my bag. I read the instructions carefully. It says I can either piss in a pot or wee directly on to the stick, being careful not to go above the blue line. I'm not sure how you wee with that much precision without a penis so I go for the first option, still managing to get some on my fingers as I aim for the glass.

When it's been dunked for at least fifteen seconds, I put the test on my bedside table, set a timer and sit on my bed. At times like these, I always feel the best thing to do is to write a list. The 'why being pregnant would be a disaster' side is pretty easy to fill. *Useless married baby daddy. No money. Barely room in my flat to swing a cat. Having to give up alcohol. Ability, or lack thereof, to look after a baby.* The list goes on. Then, just as I finish writing the one and only pro I can think of, the timer starts beeping. With my heart in my throat, I scoot across the bed and force my eyes to look at the test.

A single blue line stares back at me. I hold it up to the

light, searching frantically for a second line as if I want it to be there. But it's not. And I don't. I only have to look at my list, like a one-legged man, to know this is, without doubt, the best outcome. And that this feeling in my chest, like a sinking stone, is just a strange form of relief.

* * *

As I walk down the dingy corridor of the block of retirement flats my nan lives in, the yellow strip lights, dated carpets and smell of overcooked vegetables make me instantly depressed (brimming with joy as I was when I arrived). I knock on her door but she doesn't answer, so I let myself in.

Nan's leaning forward in her chair and shouting at the television. She's incensed. Apparently the detective in the murder mystery she's glued to is missing a vital and obvious clue. It's called suspense, Nan. They do that on purpose.

I touch her lightly on the shoulder so as not to scare her. 'Hi, Nan, I've brought Chinese.' I hold up the plastic bag containing the food.

She looks surprised, as she always does when she sees me standing here, despite the fact I've been visiting her every week for the past six years, since we met at Dad's funeral. Then she crinkles her nose as if detecting a particularly repugnant smell. 'What have you done to your hair? You look like one of them queers.'

I run my hand over my bristly head. 'Nice to see you too, Nan. And they're called gay or homosexual. You can't say queer any more.'

'I'm eighty-six. I'll say what I bloody well want.'